



4-15-2004

Global Wars and Writing Warrior Culture: *disClosure* interviews Anthony Swofford

Anna Froula
University of Kentucky

Danny Mayer
University of Kentucky

Jonathan Vincent
University of Kentucky

Keith Woodward
University of Arizona

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.13.08>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Froula, Anna; Mayer, Danny; Vincent, Jonathan; and Woodward, Keith (2004) "Global Wars and Writing Warrior Culture: *disClosure* interviews Anthony Swofford," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 13 , Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.13.08>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol13/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

Anita Froula, Danny Mayer, Jonathan Vincent, and
Keith Woodward

Global Wars and Writing Warrior Culture: disClosure interviews Anthony Swofford

Anthony Swofford is Assistant Professor of English at Saint Mary's College of California. His first book, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*, is a memoir detailing his experiences as a marine sniper during and after the first Gulf War. Released on the eve of the second war in the Gulf, the book received considerable critical attention and Swofford appeared in several interviews with the popular press during the spring of 2003. During the summer of 2003, *disClosure* was fortunate to catch Swofford giving a reading from *Jarhead* at Lexington's Joseph Beth Bookstore. After several hours of gentle pleading, Swofford agreed to a phone interview later that month.

In his interview with *disClosure*, Swofford discusses the U.S. wars in the Gulf in the contexts of the emergence of globalization, the transformations of nations and national identities, and the changing social and political characteristics of the soldier.

dC: Your connection with this issue's theme—globalization—seems almost intuitive. You fought in and wrote on the first Gulf War. Have you given much thought to the way your work addresses any sorts of global as opposed to national concerns?

AS: When a writer in this century decides to write about war, the issue is instantly global. That's largely a result of the Gulf War movements toward globalizing warfare. This happened

on the surface in terms of the supposed coalition that was fighting GW1 and also throughout the nineties with America using the United Nations. Of course in this last war we saw a total collapse of that. So in terms of shared interests and shared responsibility there was a failure in terms of the practical nature of the war but it was obviously a global concern.

dC: What relation does the present "Global War on Terror" have to your text? Particularly in the context of nationalism, the legitimating discourses seem to have altered, downplaying nation and emphasizing conceptions of struggles for global peace. These are, of course, the words of the politicians. Can you speculate about the possible changing contexts for the Jarhead and how this (sub)culture might respond to them?

AS: The Jarhead is changed by these outside forces that are attempting to explode his reason for being and also to further legitimize his training; he's always been different from the normal 18 year old kid. The Jarhead is an 18 year old kid who needs wants must go kill, which is not normal. So if we say that the Jarhead's role in the world is no longer just about protecting America, which is a domestic fringe culture, but forcing or attempting to usher in some era of global peace, then what's occurring is an attempt to make the Jarhead, and his warrior culture, more important and omnipresent.

dC: What do you think of the role of actually being in the war as opposed to people who haven't been to war – we're thinking in light of presidential elections now that seem to hinge upon military commanders entering into the democratic race and having immediate legitimacy because they have been in the military. What is it that is so valuable in *being-there* for an American society?

AS: This ties in to the question about the change of the Jarhead in terms of global security policy rather than nationalist security policy. When a country is at war in at least a few places at once—it might be that many people need some sort of warrior figure—they need, they desire, a commander-in-chief and not just a president. And of course that's being sold to them because war is a product, the second oldest product. Fighting the global war on terror, which has no fronts and is everywhere at once, can cause a moral sickness, and this desire for a warrior leader dressed

in the regalia of combat is the result. And the current administration will provide the actors. But you need not have fought wars in order to run the country or to understand war.

dC: It seemed that you distinguished, for the reader, two different types of war machines in *Jarhead*. There is the state machine, with this desire for oil and military presence in Saudi Arabia, and then there are the Jarheads who desire, in your words, to "fight, rape, war, pillage, burn." While the state desires are fulfilled – the US secures oil, establishes a Middle East presence that they're still trying to further today – the same cannot be said for those desires of the Jarheads. There is little fighting in your book, there is only a single rape (a simulated platoon gang-bang on a male platoon member), and because of newer technological military apparatus, the missiles take care of the pillaging and the burning. Does the post-war alienation grow out of the state's exploitation of the Jarhead's particular pornographic desire for war?

AS: What occurs in the infantry, in step by step fashion, is a young, eighteen year-old, generally male, person is indoctrinated into a lifestyle that is most likely contrary to what he is used to. The insertion of a psychotic dream occurs, and that psychotic dream involves the desire to fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. When the Jarhead doesn't, in combat, take part in the fighting, the raping, the pillaging, the burning, he has been set up for a sick satisfaction that never occurs. He is then quite aware, post-war certainly, of the fact that he is not normal because of that psychotic dream that he took part in and was interested in. And that causes alienation and loneliness.

dC: What about the state's role in this? It seems that the state gives you the ability to have those dreams and, in some instances, promotes those dreams as well.

AS: Absolutely. The state, in the form of the department of defense, particularly in the form of the recruiter who sells the young civilian kid on the lifestyle, on the dream, is totally implicated in forcing this new twisted morality on the young men, a world where it's okay to want to kill people and destroy lifestyles and even forms of government.

dC: What sorts of benefits did you see or interactions did you have, as a

Jarhead, from a larger coalition in the Gulf War and how does that seem to compare to the current climate of unilateralism surrounding the present war in Iraq? Was there a lot of interaction between and amongst these different militaries?

AS: We did a bit of training with the Brits and some Egyptian army guys. The war was fought by the Americans that time just as it is this time. But I think what multilateralism offers is a different flag to fly under, a multivaried flag and presence.

dC: So, for the Jarhead on the ground, then, there wasn't much of a practical difference?

AS: No, for the Jarhead on the ground it doesn't matter. The Jarhead on the ground doesn't care if it's the Brits, the Aussies, the Poles, the Germans, or the French. The Jarhead on the ground is concerned about other Jarheads. In fact, the Jarhead on the ground is somewhat leery of those other international forces. He is convinced that he is part of the finest fighting force in the world. Why does he need the help of others and can he really trust the effectiveness of those other forces? It's somewhat bothersome for him.

dC: You conclude your book with a discouraging comment on the waste of war and the exhaustive pronouncement that the waste will never end (which has gotten a lot of talk). Because so much writing seeks to affect cultural change, the admission of such helpless objection seems to negate writing's subversive potential—its ability to challenge structures of power. What do you see as the factors perpetuating a cycle of aggression that seem to guarantee its permanence? How then, do you think about the role of memoir and the social potential for writing?

AS: Well I think this particular cycle of aggression—warfare—that I see will never end. You know, global factors affect that. Economic factors, too. We see that outside Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the men working in a factory making missiles are excited that a war is forthcoming because that means a lot of missiles are going to be blown off, which means that more missiles are needed, which means they continue with their union job that pays them well enough so that they can put food on their table in an otherwise weak economy. And obviously there are the

bigger shoes who are making the bigger money, as well as political powers attempting to gain power in the world at the national and international levels. I would argue that a defeatist attitude toward the inevitability of the big shoes getting their way is not necessarily anti-subversive. Truth is subversive. To narrate the reality of the warriors' training and institutionalized desires is subversive. The memoirist's task is to, as an artist, decide what from real life must survive in the narrative life of the book. These are aesthetic as well as social choices, and private choices. Every writer's first and most important obligation is to write the best book possible each time. And if the writer has created lasting art then it will reverberate through the culture, and this is important socially, politically, and aesthetically.

dC: Your descriptions of Kuwait City and Detroit both display a consciousness of their uneven development as cities. This surfaces not only in terms of economic difference, but also in the relations between classes and power. Did you find that these distant cities echoed each other, particularly in the context of the presence of American (military, economic, etc.) power?

AS: I'd actually never considered that before but certainly the two cities do play against each other. Kuwait City, in the throes of being occupied by an enemy army, first the army of Saddam Hussein, the class difference there, the great gulf between the expatriate workers who shoulder much of the labor in the country, and Detroit, a city suffering blight and the loss of jobs, a large population of starving poor and working poor. What does that say? I think it narrates the dehumanization of the individual when industry and warfare are more important than the workers and the humans who make the industries run. And when profits for the few are more important than the lives of the many whose heads the missiles land on.

dC: You develop an image of Saudis riding by the coalition soldiers in their limousines—the "Kuwaiti Cheneys." How does this image play into the Jarhead ideology, especially when juxtaposed against "the people who are 'us,'" the flag-waving poor people America wants to liberate? How do you read those sorts of class differences?

AS: Yeah, the weight of the class difference when we dirty, grungy,

grunts who hadn't showered in forty days are in the back of humvees and the guy in his mercedes blows by us at 70 on the superhighway with his wife or daughters in the back of the car. That lifestyle, that power, that money was what we were protecting. *Jarhead* partly came out of anger and discomfort with the realization that, especially in an all-volunteer army, it's mostly the poor boys who are out there doing the fighting and the dying. Of course, we were all volunteers. We all signed up, but I think it's also necessary to recognize that there are class issues involved in who fights our wars for us and who fights our wars for other people.

dC: During Gulf War II, American corporate media channels fashioned a nationalism around narratives of imagined community, a monolithic or homogenizing conception of the nation as unified through its mutually endured crisis. Your book seemed to emerge as an incisive rupture to that organizational order as a personal testimony to the way in which national narratives generate solidarity as a fiction with distinct political functions. Since its publication occurred at a rather delicate political moment, would you mind commenting on the way that your book was received in both the U.S. and other countries? How did its "controversy" meet with differing political agendas?

AS: I was actually kind of surprised at the way the media received me, and I think part of that has to do with the fact that often in mainstream media, people deciding who goes on shows haven't actually, say, read the book that the author has written. I was often asked to appear on shows because what I offered was the grunt's-eye view of combat. And that wasn't available elsewhere. At the same time, I liked being asked to appear on FOX news a few times—I was surprised about that, but I was also keenly aware that a few of those times I was simply filler, I was content for them. I was being used and of course my publicist was happily using them. I never went up against Bill O'Reilly. I wanted to.

And then in terms of the book's audience, there were three different ways the book was received. One was through mainstream media, another through the critical realm, and finally through the popular audience. In mainstream media, I think I was kind of used as filler. However, what I found interesting was off-camera: the producers and the bookers who'd actually read the book were excited about getting a voice

on-air that was offering exactly what you called something contrary, a rupture to the produced homogenization of the country at arms, at war in support. And so the people at the desks that we don't see on TV who are between, somewhere in the dark corridors between the big shoes at the networks and the talking heads, were interested in the contrary view that I was offering. For the critical responses, the fact that the war was about to happen—and this was in effect when some of the criticism was being written on the book—I don't think that that affected the criticism, it certainly shouldn't have, because criticism needs to be about text first.

And then in terms of the popular response, I was somewhat overwhelmed by that, simply as the writer of a book to be out in the public and to hear readers respond to what you've written is enormously satisfying, and even if it's a negative response, if it caused them to be troubled, that's fine too. I often prefer that. I was telling a story last night; I was speaking to a class at University of San Francisco, and I, in fact, shared an anecdote about my reading in Lexington, where three marines showed up wearing their dress blue uniforms. They were lifers, they were marines, they were right off of the poster like I had been at one point. I saw those guys and thought, "are those guys going to rough me up after the reading?" I was somewhat nervous about reading in front of them. I had even considered maybe, really briefly, should I taper my reading for these guys? Because I was going to read the long section about always being a Jarhead, and as I recall, I didn't change my reading, but that just showed kind of a weakness on my part, because afterward those guys waited until everyone else had had their book signed and had a chat with me, and said, "Hey, thanks for writing this book. We're giving copies to guys who are coming back from Iraq right now."

Overseas people are interested in an American perspective on contemporary warfare that isn't tainted by corporate media interests or the story of the hour, a voice not stoned on nationalist, isolationist rhetoric.

dC: I don't know if you are a fan of *The Onion* (as we are), but in Scott Tobias's review of *Jarhead* for that paper, he suggested that the book has caused a commotion simply by telling the truth. Have you found this to be the case?

AS: I think that's certainly part of it. I think it's also *how* I told the truth

that has caused the commotion. Because I'm a writer and my use of language and structure and my reformulation of the narrative that was shared at one time with others is important to the "truth" of the experience. There's a difference between real life and narrative life and the pressure on me as a writer, rather than as a former-marine who has lived through war, was to construct a narrative life that offered an honest glimpse of that real life but that also refined the experience through language and rumination, language and rumination being the writer's only weapons against lies and death. Rumination is abnormal.

dC: What do you think is the relationship between your book and your audience?

AS: It's a complex relationship because some active marines will tell me, "Yeah this is it, still. You'll be happy to know that the Suck hasn't changed." And others are upset about it. It's a rupture in that publicly manufactured image of the warrior. It's also a rupture of the privately made-up image of the warrior. So that's challenging for some. The relatives of marines are please and horrified with this window on their Marine's lifestyle. And those with no link to the military are grateful for an entrance into a closed society. They are also relieved to realize that the young men who are asked and who choose to go fight and die are generally fine young men who want more than anything to live.

dC: We'd like to open that rupture up a little more. You mentioned very early on in *Jarhead* that even anti-war films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Born on the Fourth of July* are "pornography for the military man." How do you see your own work – or the work of other recent writers who have also taken on the subject of war, such as O'Brien and Caputo – in relation to that sort of statement. Is *Jarhead* also pornography for the military man?

AS: Because narrative accounts of war will always seduce some people, *Jarhead* can in some ways also be considered that same type of pornography as well as, say, *The Things They Carried*, *Going After Cacciato*, *A Rumor of War*. As I say in *Jarhead*, there's a point where it doesn't matter what Mr. and Mrs. Johnson think about *Apocalypse Now* (and we could put *Jarhead* and *The Things They Carried* in that same sentence) because the young men who are equipped with the weaponry and the

will to fight are effected in the same way by those narratives, they are excited by them and the horribly exciting possibility of fighting and killing and dying, and war will remain seductive for a certain subset.

dC: That's interesting because so many of those movies have been conceived of as anti-war films; especially Coppola's pictures and also some of the Oliver Stone films. How do these function as pornography when their essential message is "this is something we don't want to keep getting ourselves into?" Or, could it be that the way that these things are promoted, they are also pornography for the populations-at-large as well, that we enjoy seeing them just as much?

AS: The population *does* enjoy seeing the horrors of war. It may be one of those dirty pleasures that people aren't necessarily willing to admit. It also creates further distance between the civilian population and the military population. Because now the civilian can get a view of what the Jarhead must do but also distance him or herself from the actuality of it, because that couch in Omaha will never be a fighting hole in Baghdad.

dC: That leads into some questions we had about aesthetics. We are interested in you *as a writer*. On numerous occasions in *Jarhead*, you describe the books you read as a soldier, frequently materials within the genre of war narrative. How conscious were you as a soldier of writing's capacity for both mobilizing and challenging the very endeavors you were participating in during the war? As a writer now, do you sense a connection to a narrative tradition that extends back thousands of years? What do you see as your place in this history?

AS: First off, I was only a reader then. I wasn't a writer. What those books offered me was solace and a place to be less alone within the war machine, which is—despite the hundreds of thousands of people that might be around you about to fight—a very lonely place. So in terms of mobilizing and challenging, it was doing that for me as an individual. My reading was throwing into stark relief the physical, very prominent, reality of the sand in my face and the sweat and the fear and the possibility of dying soon – it was throwing all of that in relief against the greater history of warfare. The link that I allude to a few times in *Jarhead*—that each rifleman who is fighting now can be linked back to the men in the Phalanx, fighting with leather strapped to their bodies—that's, of

course, some kind of romance as well. A different kind of romance than the romance the mythos of the Marine Corps induces. So, the literature that I was reading was a kind of romance as well. And romance keeps us distant from reality. Not just because *Jarhead* is a war narrative, but because *Jarhead* is now a book, it's a capsule, it's a portrait of a person and a time, a historical event, and so in that way, the act of narrative extends back, there's a link between the history of the Peloponnesian War and *Homage to Catalonia* and *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Things They Carried*. How might I place myself and my book within this history? You know, I don't. That's for others to do. I place *Jarhead* on a bookshelf and turn away from it. I place myself alone in a room trying to write another book.

dC: *Jarhead* revisits wartime sexual politics. Young American soldiers are historically a major source of funding during war and peace for impoverished sex workers in developing countries. Just in practical matters, what complicity does America at war have for the globalization of venereal diseases?

AS: For pregnancies that occur, for fatherless children that are the results of the deployment of American servicemen—we saw that all over Europe after both of the World Wars, in Japan after World War II, and that continues. America at war and at peace is part of that ugly scene that encourages and allows sex work to blossom and grow. The part that's hard to grapple with is that you have American military doctors going out to brothels and performing V. D. checks, which is a good service for everyone, but maybe it would be a better service if they used the military police power to lock the brothels down. But that's not going to work either because the young *Jarhead* who's overseas is going to find the sex. So, if a corpsman is policing the ranks of the local prostitutes and attempting to keep diseases from spreading, then maybe that's the best service they can do in light of the human wants which are going to override any sort of stops that the institution tries to put in place. And, unfortunately, the native populations rely on the sex industry for large portions of income. They'd be angry if the brother shut down. The working girls wouldn't be, but the men and families that force them to sell their bodies would. Just think, your tax dollars help pay a corporal's salary and he buys a prostitute in Bangkok.

dC: It seems to us that the proliferation of the sex industry—in both World Wars and Vietnam—that is sometimes a response to military presence, or perhaps a component of it, is almost absent in the Gulf War. Why do you suppose there were no tales of this kind of sex work going on in the Gulf War and what sorts of effects does that lack have on the soldiers?

AS: There are sex workers in the region but they're used by a class other than the *Jarhead* class, that is, the native moneyed class. At least that's who the sex workers in the Middle East service. And alcohol and drugs should be addressed here too because I think it's all part of the same stew. The command was, I think, elated when they knew they were fighting in a region where drugs, alcohol, and purchased sex wasn't available, wouldn't be a major problem for them in terms of controlling the miscreant men who were after that. Simply, it wasn't there because the command didn't allow it to be introduced and, I think, those are lessons learned from, say, Vietnam when your guys are more interested in getting wasted and laid then they are about going out and getting killed, which is quite understandable, wanting to get wasted and laid rather than killed. You, as a commander, are going to have a better fighting force—maybe a pissed off or horny fighting force because they haven't been laid in six months—but nonetheless a more focused group, focused on their battle and certainly not addicted or hung over or medicating sores on their genitals.

Globalization in 25 Words or Less

Globalization is the attempt to make the world smaller by way of economics, but it is actually causing more isolation than ever.

Rebecca Smith
University of Kentucky
United States

Minimizing the distances between countries in view of economics, politics, and culture.

Hong Yuan-Jian
National University of Singapore
Singapore

Globalization means that changing environmental, technological and economic conditions no longer occur in isolation. All corners of the world will be affected in some way.

Jennifer Fuller
Flinders University
Adelaide, Australia